

A photograph of a Florida Cooter turtle resting on a log. The turtle has a dark olive-brown top shell with faint yellow markings, a dark head with a bright yellow stripe, and a light yellow bottom shell with dark spots. It is facing left.

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NATURE'S *reflections*

THE FLORIDA COOTER

Has its own festival right here in Central Florida

The Florida Cooter (*Pseudemys floridana*) is of the family emyidae, the largest family of freshwater turtles. It is found in the southeastern coastal areas of the United States, from southeastern Virginia southward through all of Florida and westward to Mobile Bay, Alabama. The Florida cooter is mainly herbivorous and inhabits large ponds, lakes, slow-moving canals, rivers and sloughs with soft bottoms and plenty of aquatic vegetation. It is generally active year-round and spends a large portion of the day basking in the sunshine. Like most turtles it is toothless with a sharp biting edge on its beak and can draw its head and legs inside the shell for protection.

The Florida cooter is one of the most frequently seen turtles. The dark olive-brown top shell has faint to bright yellow markings on each plate, while the head and feet are dark brown with bright yellow stripes. Florida cooters are moderate sized turtles, and average nine to fifteen inches in length. It is very similar in appearance to the River cooter. Florida cooters have a dark hardened top shell called a carapace and light yellow bottom shell called a plastron. Both parts are covered with hard plates called scutes. The Florida cooter has been known to hybridize with the River cooter, and, to a lesser extent, the Redbelly turtle. Some scientists believe that Florida and River cooters are the same species.

Florida cooters breed between May and July. Males reach maturity in three years. Females take six to seven years to mature. Males are differentiated from females by the elongated front claws. The female digs several nest cavities within inches of each other and lays at least one egg in each cavity. She usually lays two clutches, each consisting of between four and twenty-two eggs. Incubation takes eighty to one hundred fifty days. When the eggs hatch, the young claw their way to the surface and fend for themselves.

The loss of wetlands has reduced suitable habitat for Florida cooters. Mortality also occurs as roads and highways further fragment and isolate wetland habitats.

A plus in our service area: the Great American Cooter Festival is held in Inverness, Florida each year during the last full week of October. 🐢

Column & photo by Sandi Staton – sandi.staton@secoenergy.com